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# Nigeria The 1979 Election Challenge

An Intelligence Assessment

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# Nigeria: The 1979 Election Challenge (U)

**An Intelligence Assessment**

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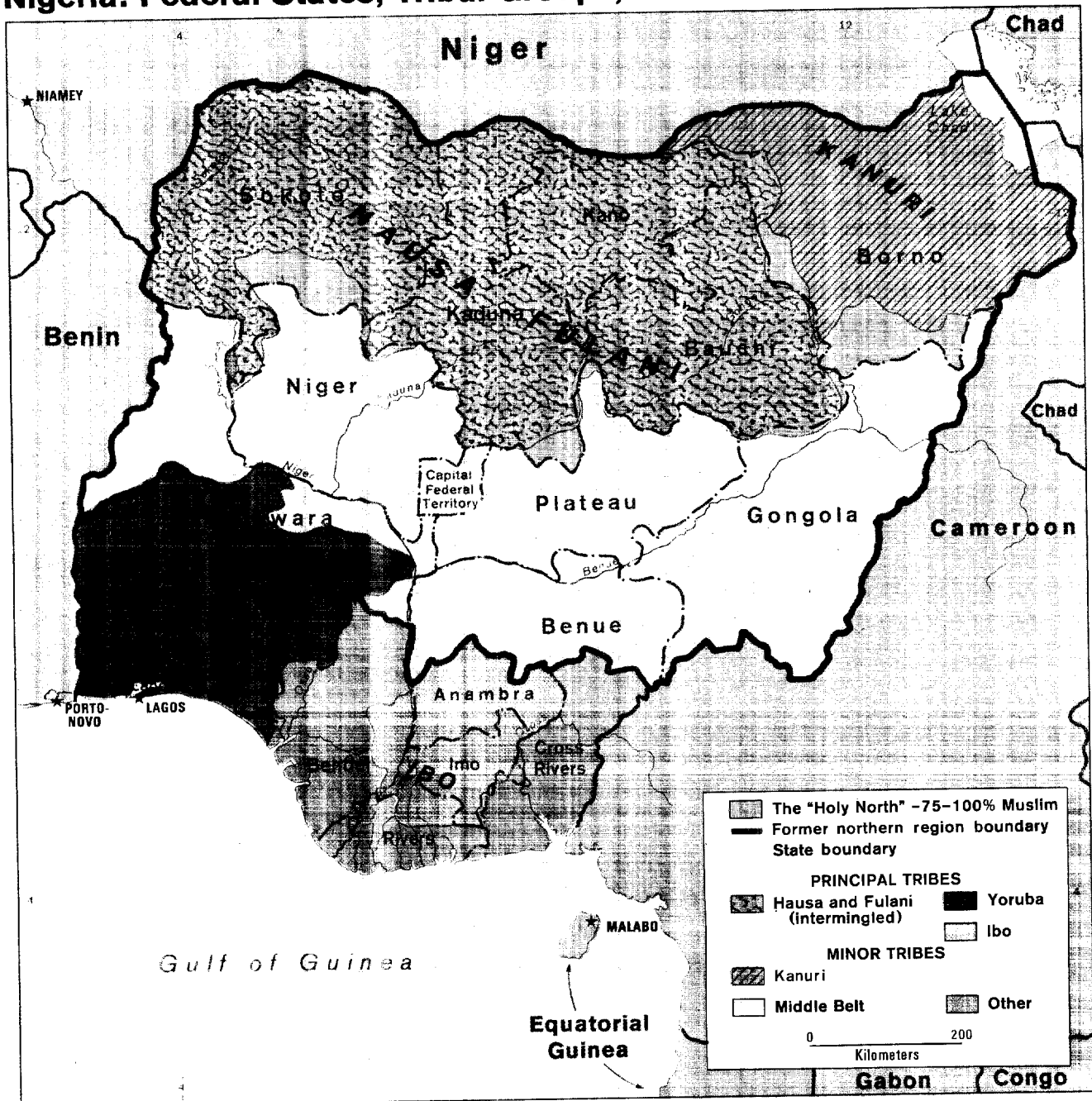
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## Nigeria: Federal States, Tribal Groups, and Islam



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**Nigeria :  
The 1979 Election Challenge (U)**

**Key Judgments**

Nigeria has arrived at the last phase of its transition to civilian rule planned for next October, but still must pass the test of national elections this summer. Although many uncertainties remain, we are guardedly optimistic that the changeover will occur.

- Several factors favor the restoration of civilian rule, particularly the determination of General Obasanjo's government to avoid stormy elections and to see Nigeria through whatever problems develop between now and October.
- The election period could well have difficult moments, however, and there clearly is a risk that the transition may yet be disrupted.
- Since political violence is an endemic problem in Nigerian politics, a heated electoral contest might degenerate into widespread communal strife along ethnic and regional lines and cause the regime to cancel its civil rule plan.
- The elections could polarize the Army and spur a coup attempt should ethnic bitterness, communal violence, or administrative chaos pass a certain unacceptable point.
- Shehu Shagari, presidential candidate of the northern Muslim-oriented National Party, is the most likely victor, unless radical realignments occur in the course of Nigeria's multistage elections.
- A prospective civilian government—whatever its leadership—is likely to be more conservative, preoccupied with domestic affairs and stability, and less active internationally.

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## Nigeria: The 1979 Election Challenge (U)

### Prologue

After 13 years of military rule, civilian government is scheduled to be restored in Nigeria on 1 October under a program begun in 1975. So far the plan has been carried out step by step by General Obasanjo's regime in spite of numerous hurdles. Even at this late stage, however, it cannot be automatically assumed that the transition will succeed. The country's greatest challenge will be to proceed through a series of civilian elections scheduled to begin in July and end by mid-August.<sup>1</sup> The elections are fraught with many uncertainties and potential risks, particularly the possibility that the transition to civilian rule would be aborted if the electoral process slides into uncontrollable political violence or breaks down in administrative chaos. (C)

Federal and state legislative bodies must be elected and in place to act as an electoral college should gubernatorial and presidential runoff elections prove necessary.<sup>2</sup> The three legislative elections in July will pose the first real test of strength for Nigeria's five competing political parties since the formal ban on political activity was removed last September. The results probably will lead to political realignments that could significantly affect the outcome of the August presidential election. Most political parties are concentrating their efforts on the first few races in the belief that the party showing early strength will be perceived by voters as the eventual

<sup>1</sup> Nigeria's new constitution requires elections at the federal level of a US-style president and vice president, a 450-member Federal House of Representatives, and a 95-member Federal Senate. Each of the country's 19 states elects a governor, deputy governor, and a unicameral House of Assembly. Nigeria's approximately 47.4 million registered voters will go to the polls at weekly intervals according to the following schedule: Federal Senate on 7 July, Federal House of Representatives on 14 July, and state Houses of Assembly on 21 July; state governors and deputy governors on 28 July and, if required, gubernatorial runoff elections on 4 August; and federal president and vice president on 11 August, with a runoff election on 18 August, if necessary. (C)

<sup>2</sup> For a first round victory, presidential aspirants face a stiff constitutional requirement—intended to force political parties to be national in character and to put together broad ethnic coalitions—that they receive a majority of votes nationwide and one-fourth of the votes in 13 of 19 states. Failing that, the choice between the two top contenders is decided by majority vote in all the federal and state legislatures. This provision is

national victor. The early front-runner—providing there clearly is one—is counting on a bandwagon reaction as that party heads into the all-important presidential contest. (C)

### Electoral Building Blocs

The Nigerian electorate is divided into six fairly distinct groupings based on traditional ethnic and regional affinities and the pattern of civilian politics during the 1960-65 parliamentary regime.

- The *Hausa-Fulani Muslim North*, including the states of Sokoto, Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi, and Borno and part of the Niger state, has 38 percent of the electorate. Nigeria's first civilian government was dominated by the more populous north, but the region today is far more politically diverse and less united than it was in the early 1960s.

- The *Yoruba West*, including the states of Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, and Lagos and part of the Kwara state, has 22 percent of the electorate. The Yoruba traditionally have been Nigeria's most politically factionalized people.

- The *Ibo East* (ex-Biafra), with 13 percent of the vote, is made up of Imo and Anambra states. Politically cohesive in the past, the Ibo are now split into several factions.

- The *Middle Belt*, which includes minority tribesmen of the states of Plateau, Benue, and Gongola and parts of the Kwara and Niger states, has 14 percent of the total vote. This is a politically divided, ethnically and religiously mixed buffer zone between the Muslim north and predominantly Christian south.

being challenged in a court case that argues for a second popular election before a possible electoral college finale. The constitution specifically states that a runoff contest is to be between the presidential candidate who gained the largest vote nationwide and the one with the next highest number of votes in the greatest number of states. Gubernatorial runoffs will be held in respective state Houses of Assembly should no candidate obtain a majority of votes statewide and one-fourth of the votes in two-thirds of all local government areas of the state. (C)

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Table 1

## Nigerian Legislative Elections

State	Number of Registered Voters	Number of Legislative Seats		
		Federal Senate	Federal House of Representatives	State Houses of Assembly
Anambra	2,601,548	5	29	87
Bauchi	2,084,057	5	20	60
Bendel	2,376,410	5	20	60
Benue	1,563,413	5	18	54
Borno	2,753,400	5	24	72
Cross River	2,442,227	5	28	84
Gongola	2,284,500	5	22	66
Imo	3,465,198	5	30	90
Kaduna	3,420,839	5	33	99
Kano	5,174,447	5	46	138
Kwara	1,085,165	5	14	42
Lagos	1,811,973	5	12	36
Niger	1,040,753	5	10	30
Ogun	1,603,004	5	12	36
Ondo	2,422,714	5	22	66
Oyo	4,520,120	5	42	126
Plateau	1,618,378	5	16	48
Rivers	1,409,472	5	14	42
Sokoto	3,756,139	5	37	111
<b>Total</b>	<b>47,433,757</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>449<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>1,347</b>

<sup>1</sup> Nigeria's new constitution provides for 450 seats for the federal House of Representatives, which includes one for the yet-to-be-organized territory where the federal capital will eventually be relocated. (U)

This table is Unclassified.

• The *Non-Ibo East*, which includes the minority tribes of Cross Rivers and Rivers states, contains 8 percent of the electorate.

• *Bendel State*, a borderland of minority tribes between the major Yoruba and Ibo peoples, has about 5 percent of the vote. (C)

These components provide the electoral blocs from which the main political parties must assemble wide enough coalitions to elect their presidential slates under existing constitutional rules. Within this context, the traditional triangle of electoral competition has re-emerged in which parties representing Nigeria's three

main ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo—are battling for inroads in one another's regional strongholds and in minority tribe borderlands. (C)

Rural areas, where most Nigerians live, are expected to vote largely along ethnic and regional lines and to follow the direction of traditional local leaders or old-line politicians. The behavior of the presumably more sophisticated and politically aware urban voter is less predictable. This group may be swayed more by populist stands of the parties and inclined to vote across ethnic lines and to split tickets. The urban vote alone, however, probably would not be enough to swing the presidential election in favor of any one candidate. (C)



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### Parties, Leaders, and Prospects

Five political parties have been registered to compete in the 1979 elections (see table 2). All are in varying degrees regionally based, led by old-line politicians, and for the most part descendants of parties that existed in the early 1960s. As a result, political campaigning has generally followed traditional lines of ethnic and regional competition. Party parochialism is not as extreme, however, as during the first republic. (C)

14 • The major northern Muslim-oriented *National Party of Nigeria* (NPN) is clearly the front-runner going into the elections. It represents the north's conservative traditional establishment and is a factional alliance of northern political barons. Their compromise choice as presidential candidate is Shehu Shagari, a 55-year-old Muslim Fulani and a man of ability and moderation. The NPN is widely perceived as the party with the strongest national base but the one whose standard bearer projects the weakest leadership image. It expects to do well in various areas of the Middle Belt and the south.

25X6 • The *Unity Party of Nigeria* (UPN), led by veteran Yoruba politician Obafemi Awolowo, is a resurrection of his Yoruba-based party of the early 1960s. Although well organized, the UPN has little support outside the Yoruba West.

25X6 • The *Nigerian People's Party* (NPP) is based in the Ibo east with some support among minority tribes in the Middle Belt and south. Its presidential candidate is Nnamdi Azikiwe, a 75-year-old Ibo who was Nigeria's ceremonial president under the first parliamentary regime. Azikiwe has more prestige than his party, since the Ibo still are tainted by their attempted secession as Biafrans in 1967.

14 • The *Great Nigerian People's Party* (GNPP) is a personal vehicle for the presidential ambition of Waziri Ibrahim, a 53-year-old Muslim Kanuri from the northeast. One of Nigeria's wealthiest businessmen who allegedly has some following in the military, Ibrahim has a nontribal style

Table 2

### Nigerian Political Parties

Party Name	National Candidates and Tribal Affiliation	Orientation
<b>Major Parties</b>		
National Party	President: Shehu Shagari (Fulani) Vice President: Alex Ekueme (Ibo)	Northern Muslim-oriented and dominated by major Hausa-Fulani ethnic group; has some support among major southern tribes and minority tribes of Nigeria's Middle Belt; generally conservative, right wing cast.
Unity Party	President: Obafemi Awolowo (Yoruba) Vice President: Phillip Umeadi (Ibo)	Based primarily on major southern Yoruba ethnic group with little support elsewhere; strong populist stance.
Nigerian People's Party	President: Nnamdi Azikiwe (Ibo) Vice President: not yet chosen	Based heavily on major southern Ibo ethnic group, eastern minority tribes, and Middle Belt support; moderate centrist group.
<b>Minor Parties</b>		
Great Nigerian People's Party	President: Waziri Ibrahim (Kanuri) Vice President: Benjamin Nzeribe (Ibo)	Dissident northern Muslim faction with a small scattering of Middle Belt and southern support; moderate centrist grouping.
People's Redemption Party	President: Aminu Kano (Fulani) Vice President: Samuel Ikoku (Ibo)	Alliance of antitraditional northerners and progressive southern Ibos; reformist and xenophobic outlook.

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Shehu Shagari-1975



Nnamdi Azikiwe-1976



Obafemi Awolowo-1978



Waziri Ibrahim-pre-1965



Aminu Kano-1978

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The GNPP is strongest in Borno and Sokoto states in the north and has a small following in the Middle Belt and the east.

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• The *People's Redemption Party* (PRP), composed of northerners adamantly opposed to the traditional elite, is dominated by Aminu Kano, a 59-year-old Muslim Fulani who led a similar grouping in the early 1960s. It is based mainly in northern Kano and Kaduna states and is especially prone to violence. The PRP sees its role as a spoiler in northern politics and allegedly receives Libyan support. (C)

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The presidential contest is clouded by uncertainty and controversy over whether or not NPP candidate Azikiwe and PRP leader Kano will be disqualified under the election law for failure to provide proof of payment of past income taxes. The two were put on notice last April that they would be barred, but the regime—concerned that their disqualification could spark rioting—may yet find a way out by letting at least the more important Azikiwe run. Azikiwe and Kano cannot be formally disqualified until one month before the 11 August presidential election, and both are waging a legal battle to stay in the race. NPP and PRP followers privately attribute the disqualification move to collusion between the front-running National Party and influential northern members of the ruling military council who hope to retain senior military posts under civilian rule. (C)

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If the National Party defeats its assorted rivals in the north and does well elsewhere in the legislative elections, the party could possibly win a first round presidential election. Should the National Party falter badly in early contests, the political lineup could change radically and result in a "stop-Awolowo" coalition since the Unity Party is perceived as the second strongest party. An Awolowo victory seems improbable because of the depth of anti-Yoruba feeling in the north and Ibo east. Awolowo and his supporters, nevertheless, harbor unrealistic expectations of electoral breakthroughs and seem destined for severe disappointment. (C)

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A presidential runoff election is likely to be between a northern candidate (Shehu Shagari or Waziri Ibrahim) and Awolowo, or possibly the third-ranking NPP candidate Azikiwe, if he is not disqualified. The makeup of

the electoral college gives an advantage to a northern candidate—if regional unity operates—since the north has the largest bloc of legislative seats. (C)

If Azikiwe and Kano are disqualified, the principal beneficiary would be GNPP leader Waziri Ibrahim. He would be likely to pick up the support of Aminu Kano's PRP followers and possibly important votes from the NPP, which was led by Waziri Ibrahim before it split into two parties last fall. It is even possible that Waziri Ibrahim and Shehu Shagari could face each other in a presidential runoff. (C)

#### Campaign Issues

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Personalities and domestic issues, rather than foreign affairs, figure most prominently in the Nigerian election campaign. There is nothing in the makeup of the leading presidential candidates or their party platforms to suggest that Nigeria would embark on radical change under civilian leadership. Each political party espouses broad populist goals and has promised a sweeping array of welfare benefits. The main parties seem to accept the continuation of a mixed economy and to be relatively nondoctrinaire in their economic views. There is general agreement on the broad outlines of Nigeria's present nonaligned foreign policy, and all parties have made pro forma statements of support for the liberation struggle in southern Africa. (C)

#### The Risks Ahead

##### Political Violence

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Since political violence is an endemic problem in Nigerian politics, a heated electoral contest could degenerate into communal strife along ethnic and regional lines and possibly result in a breakdown of public order that the security forces could not contain. The depth of underlying tension is difficult to gauge, but sectional strains will inevitably increase as elections occur. Political violence has gradually increased in recent months. The rawest political contests are in the traditional trouble spots—the Yoruba west, the Middle Belt, Kano state in the north, and Bendel state in the south. (C)

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The likelihood of violence will depend to a large extent on how the presidential disqualification issue shapes up in early July and on the government's ability to contain recent student unrest in the north, which has taken on

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antisouthern and anti-Christian overtones directed particularly at the Yoruba. Much depends on the success of leadership by politicians and local traditional leaders in avoiding exacerbating tensions within the country. (C)

The situation would deteriorate rapidly in the extreme event that one of the presidential candidates were assassinated or refused to accept the prospect of defeat and incited his followers to mob action.

Violence instigated by followers of the People's Redemption Party most likely would be largely confined to Kano state and would not in itself be enough to disrupt the overall electoral process. (C)

#### *Partial Election Boycott*

Even if serious political violence is averted, the presidential election might be boycotted in some areas of the country should their preferred presidential candidates be disqualified. (The last national election, in 1964, was boycotted by the Ibo east and other scattered areas.) Such a development would give a prospective civilian government an inauspicious start and leave it open to charges of not representing the popular will.

#### *Administrative Bungling*

The government's logistic preparations for elections have been marked by inefficiency and ineptitude. Widespread administrative breakdowns by the federal electoral commission would significantly increase the risk of disruptions and claims of vote-rigging—two persistent features of Nigerian elections. Election problems could be complicated by the questionable accuracy of the national voter roll and by the possible disqualification for income tax irregularities of many of the 9,000-odd candidates the political parties have fielded for various offices.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the election dates coincide with the rainy season and the Muslim observance of Ramadan, which threaten to reduce voter turnout in rural areas and the north generally. The handling and tabulation of ballots for five closely spaced elections will be further impeded both by the sheer size of the electorate and by the country's inadequate transport and communications facilities. (C)

<sup>3</sup>Under election rules, a political candidate cannot be formally disqualified until one month before the scheduled date of the election he is contesting. (C)

#### *Voter Confusion*

There is some risk that the voting public may have difficulty coping with five separate elections and the large number of candidates involved. A majority of Nigeria's predominantly youthful society is illiterate and has never voted before. (C)

#### *Military Polarization*

The electoral contest could polarize the military establishment should ethnic bitterness, communal violence, or administrative chaos pass a certain unacceptable point. At present, the ruling military council is united in its desire to hand over power and is vigilant against possible dissent in the lower ranks. Middle-grade and junior officers—many of whom are thought to be lukewarm about civilian rule—seem inclined to let civilian government come to pass and to wait for it to break down before seizing power. One concern is that the disqualification of NPP presidential candidate Azikiwe might spur unrest in the Army, where Middle Belt tribes—which heavily back this party—are well represented. (C)

#### *Outlook*

On balance, we are guardedly optimistic that Nigeria will pass the test of elections and that the transition to civilian rule will take place more or less on schedule. The election period may well have stormy episodes, however, and there clearly is a risk that the plan may yet be aborted. (C)

Whether or not civilian rule is restored depends almost entirely on the avoidance of widespread electoral violence. If there is serious strife, the Obasanjo regime would probably cancel its civilian rule plan as much to forestall a possible coup by middle-grade and junior officers as to restore stability. It is also possible that the 1 October turnover date to civilian rule could be delayed somewhat should it prove necessary to stretch out the election schedule or should vote-counting be delayed by administrative inefficiency. (C)

A number of positive factors argue for a successful transition:

- The general absence to date in the long preelection campaign of serious outbreaks of political disorder.

/ • The regime's determination to proceed with a transfer of power and its confidence in its ability to handle trouble.

/ • The resolve of the federal electoral commission to conduct an honest election for which the results will be acceptable to the people.

/ • The constitutional requirement for building a nationwide party coalition, which should help moderate intemperate political behavior.

/ • The likelihood that no party will lose out entirely in the elections since each probably will take control of some state governments and have some representation in the federal legislature.

/ • The apparent desire of most Nigerians to return to civilian rule.

/ • The moderating behavior thus far of the country's traditional leaders, who have worked to defuse volatile situations, and of the press, which has generally refrained from overdramatizing incidents of political violence. (C)

8 How the national elections are conducted and the kind of leadership that emerges should provide a good indication of how long a new civilian regime may last. It is not clear if the presidential election can be won without recourse to a legislative runoff. Even should

there be a first round victor, it seems unlikely that he could get much more than 40 percent of the national vote, given the ethnic and constitutional setting in which Nigerian politicians must operate. This suggests that, regardless of how Nigeria's future president is chosen, his national mandate would be rather thin, and this could affect his ability to govern. A brokered legislative runoff following a heated first election could intensify the ethnic bitterness that a new leader would have to face.<sup>4</sup> (C)

20 Many informed Nigerians believe a prospective civilian government will be far more preoccupied with domestic problems and internal stability than international affairs, particularly during its first year. They expect that 21 foreign policy under civilian rule will be less activist, 22 more conservative, and generally inclined toward closer 23 economic cooperation with the West. The closeness of future Nigerian relations with Western countries, however, will initially be heavily influenced by Western moves to recognize the new Rhodesian Government and to lift sanctions, and by the severity of the response to Western actions by the present Nigerian military regime before it hands over power. (C)

<sup>4</sup> A second national election—as has been proposed—would give a greater aura of legitimacy to a presidential victor than would an electoral college verdict. It is possible, however, that the security situation in the country following the first presidential election would be unsettled enough to preclude another popular vote. (C)

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